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ABSTRACT

Project Youth, an eight-week workshop for poor minority youths, used theatre exercises to improve participants' communication and self-presentation skills in order to improve their ability to work with others. To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, a 2-phase study was conducted using a sample of participants (N=32) from 15 to 21 years old. All were Black or Hispanic with low family income. In the first phase, information was collected from workshop directors who completed questionnaires about participants' abilities and interpersonal skills at multiple points during the program. In the second phase, participants were compared in a simulated job interview to youths who had recently completed a more typical work experience program. Assessments of the participants during the program indicated steady improvement in work habits, decisivenss, and initiative. Comparison with youths who had acquired work experience indicated that the intervention group had greater verbal expressiveness and better interpersonal skills. Both groups were equally deficient in motivation. While the Project Youth intervention did improve aspects of participants' interpersonal behavior, additional work is needed to improve youths' motivation and increase favorable hiring decisions. (JAC)

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Youths at High Risk for Unemployment: Evaluation of an Intervention Program

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Abstract

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a program designed to enhance the ability of minority group youth to obtain and to retain employment. The intervention focussed on improving participant' communication and self-presentation skills. The approach contrasted to most other programs which have tried to improve future employment opportunities by providing work experience. The evaluation of the program had two phases. In the first phase, information was collected about participants' abilities and interpersonal skills at multiple points during the program. In the second phase, program participants were compared in a simulated job interview to youths who had recently completed the more typical work experience program. Assessments of the participants during the program indicated steady improvement in work habits, decisiveness, and initiative. The comparison of participants with youths who had acquired work experience indicated that the intervention group had greater verbal expressiveness and better interpersonal skills. Both groups, though, were equally deficient in motivation. In summary, the intervention did improve aspects of participants' interpersonal behavior. However, additional work needs to be done on improving motivation to increase favorable hiring decisions.

Youths at High Risk for Unemployment: Evaluation of an Intervention Program

High unemployment rates for minority group youths have been a source of concern among policy makers for many years. It is difficult to cite figures that are widely agreed upon due to the different ways these statistics are calculated. However, unemployment rates between 35% and 40% for black teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19 years are frequently cited in Labor Department statistics (e.g. Abt, 1979).

During the last decade, many programs were funded to try to reduce this high unemployment rate. They included education and training programs, incentives to return to school, and supported jobs in both public and private sectors (Hahn, 1980). Documentation of the short- or long-term success of these programs is quite limited. The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the effects of one training program.

Most of the intervention programs were designed with the implicit assumption that providing a substantial work experience or providing information about how to obtain work would increase the ability of a youth to find and to retain jobs. There is evidence, though, that minority group youths have specific deficits that would hamper their ability to retain positions. Young workers are frequently unaware of norms about acceptable behavior at the workplace, the nuances of employer-employee relationships, and appropriate interpersonal interaction with peers (Friedman, 1980; Quarels, 1980). An excellent supervisor in a supported work setting might be able to promote these behaviors, but it is difficult to select and to train supervisors who can articulate the details of interpersonal behavior.

Project Youth represented an unusual approach to teaching interpersonal skills to youths at high risk for unemployment. This program conducted 8-week workshops for poor, minority youths under the auspices of the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). This program used theater exercises to improve participants' communication and self-presentation skills. These exercises focussed on specific skill areas and were hierarchically organized so that simple skills could be taught prior to integrating these skills in more complex activities. Exercises included preparatory physical exercises (e.g., stretching, relaxation and breathing), sound and movement exercises (i.e., activities which explored nonverbal forms of communication), role playing, verbal improvisation, and scene development. It was expected that experience with these techniques would sensitize participants to their own patterns of behavior and that of others. Moreover, it was expected that the development of skills through the exercises would permit participants to more easily adapt their behavior to be appropriate in new settings, such as, a new work place.

In summary, a major goal of Project Youth was to provide participants with skills that might improve their ability to work with others. These interpersonal skills might then increase the probability that these youths would obtain and retain jobs. Thus, rather than focussing on a specific job experience, Project Youth was designed to teach preparatory skills that could be applied in any job or work setting.

The evaluation of this program was conducted in two phases. The first phase focussed on process. Information was collected about the activities occuring in the workshop and the workshop directors' perceptions of change in the participants. The second phase focussed on outcomes. It was predicted that improving communication and self-presentation

skills would increase the likelihood that participants would be hired for jobs. Since most of the participants were students, they were not applying for jobs within a short time after the program. Consequently, rate of successful hiring decisions could not be ascertained. Instead, a simulated job interview situation was used to compare the interpersonal skills of participants in Project Youth with the interviewing skills of participants acquiring work experience in other placements sponsored by the Summer Youth Employment Program.

PROCESS STUDY

Method

Subjects

The sample was composed of participants who had been in the program for at least seven of the program's eight weeks. In this sample, 27 participants were female and 5 participants were male. They ranged in age from 15 years to 21 years, although most of the participants were between 16 and 19 years of age. All the participants were Black or from Hispanic backgrounds. Because of the strict eligibility criteria used by SYEP, their families had very low incomes. The number of participants in the analyses varied because the workshop directors did not complete every question for all participants.

Procedure

Workshop directors were the source of information about the process of change. The strength of using information from the workshop leaders was their detailed knowledge of participants based upon their lengthy opportunities to observe participants. A potential weakness of using

information obtained from this source was that the workshop directors probably had biases in favor of the program which would distort their memory of the degree of change that occurred during the workshop. The problem of distortion in memory was minimized by obtaining reports on the participants very close in time to the actual observations. Retrospective reports were avoided. Thus, to describe change, the directors were asked to report their recent observations of the participants and the workshop activities at multiple points during the workshops.

Questionnaires were constructed which provided a structured and standardized format for workshop directors to report their observations. Three questionnaires were used. One questionnaire requested information about the quality of performance in specific skill areas. These two questionnaires were completely weekly. A third questionnaire consisted of a comprehensive list of specific problems that might be affected by participation in the workshop. This questionnaire was completed twice, once after the first week and once after the last week of the program.

Activities. Workshop directors were requested to state the percentage of time spent on each of the major activities that were used in the workshops. The activity categories were: relaxation and breathing, sound exercises, movement exercises, pantomine, nonverbal improvisation, verbal improvisation, dance, monologues, storytelling, scenework, and performing. This questionnaire was completed each week.

Workshop skills. On this questionnaire, workshop directors reported the frequency and quality of: (a) involvement in activities, (b) initiative, (c) constructive evaluation of self, (d) constructive evaluation of others, and (e) adaptation and application of skills and learning to new events or contexts. This questionnaire was completed

weekly for each participant by the workshop directors.

Problem areas. This questionnaire was generated from suggestions by the workshop directors based on their expectations of problem areas that might change during the program. The following problem areas were included in the questionnaire: self-confidence, self-esteem, self-control, work habits, decisiveness, expressiveness about feelings, empathy, cordiality, knowledge of theater, realistic expectations about the future, verbal expressiveness, and ease of body movement. Workshop directors used this list to indicate whether an area was a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem for each participant. They completed the list twice, once near the beginning of the program and once at the end of the program. The first time, the workshop directors also indicated whether the problem was an important goal that the director planned to work on with the participant.

Results

Workshop Activities

The collection of data about workshop activities began during the second week of the summer program. Since activities were used in combinations, the percentages of time spent on the categories of activities summed to greater than 100%.

The most commonly used activities were scenework (25% of workshop time) and verbal improvisation (20%). Verbal improvisation was frequently used during the first half of the summer program while scenework was frequently used during the second half of the summer program when the workshop participants began preparing for performances that occurred during the eighth week. Pantomine, sound exercises, and movement

exercises accounted for between 15% and 20% of workshop time. These activities were used at a fairly constant rate throughout the summer. A substantial proportion of total workshop time was also spent performing (17%), but this activity mostly occurred during the last week of the program. A small (5-10%) but regular portion of the workshops was spent on nonverbal improvisation, dance, storytelling, monologues, and relaxation and breathing exercises.

Workshop Skills

Analyses of trends over time were computed for the frequency and quality of performance for each of the aspects of workshop participation. These analyses indicated that there was a significant increase in the frequency of initiation, constructive evaluation of self, constructive evaluation of others, and adaptation and application of workshop learning (see Table 1). The quality of each of these aspects of workshop performance also increased significantly over the eight weeks. The only aspect of workshop performance which did not increase was involvement. Ratings of involvement were high during the first week that assessments were made and remained high throughout the program. Comments made by the workshop directors indicated that the directors demanded a high level of involvement as a condition for continuing in the program.

Insert Table 1 about here

The analysis of workshop performance also indicated that there was a strong linear component in the rate of change for both the frequency and the quality of initiative, adaptation of learning, and the construc-

tive evaluation of self and others (see Table 1). As indicated in Table 2, there was steady improvement in each of these skills throughout the seven weeks that data were collected. These results suggest that if a greater amount of time were spent in the workshops, participants' skills might increase even further.

Insert Table 2 about here

A comparison among the four skill areas showing improvement was made with respect to frequency of use. This analysis was based on the mean of the weekly assessments. A one-way analysis of variance computed on the average frequency scores indicated significant differences in the frequency with which each skill area was used (F (3,36)= 22.5, $p < .001$). Initiation and adaptation of learning were observed several times a day. Instances of constructive evaluation of self and others were observed somewhat more than occasionally, that is, one or two times a day. These results, represent the average of all the weeks. The previously reported findings indicated fewer instances of these skills during the first weeks of the program and more instances during the last weeks of the program.

In summary, steady and significant improvement was observed in four skill areas: initiative, adaptation of learning, constructive evaluation of self, and constructive evaluation of others. Initiative and adaptation of learning were more frequently observed than the participants' constructive evaluation of self and others.

Problem Areas

The major problems for the participants at the beginning of the

program were: an inability to express feelings, an inability to make decisions, lack of knowledge about the theater, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem. These areas were perceived to be major problems for between 35% and 40% of the participants.

When the assessments of problem areas at the beginning of the program were compared to assessments of problem areas at the end of the program, participants were perceived to have improved in three areas: ability to make decisions, knowledge of the theater, and work habits (tests for correlated means: t (31)=-2.51, $p < .05$; t (31)=-2.84, $p < .01$; t (31)=-4.53, $p < .001$). The first two of these three problem areas had been reported to be major problems for many participants at the beginning of the program.

The prior analyses were concerned with average changes for the group. However, workshop directors often tried to work with different problems depending upon the needs of particular participants. To examine the targeting of goals for participants, two average problem scores were computed for each participant for areas which the directors had indicated at the beginning of the program to be highly important goals for each participant. One score was based on the average of the ratings of problem severity which were made at the beginning of the program, and the second score was based on the average of the problem severity ratings that were made at the end of the program. There was significant improvement in these average scores. In other words, participants changed in the problem areas which were designated to be important for those individuals (t-test on correlated means, t (24)= 5.25, $p < .001$).

OUTCOME STUDY

Method

Design

Youths who were representative of SYEP enrollees were assigned to the Project Youth program or work sites. These two groups of enrollees, the Project Youth group and the group from the work sites, were compared in a role play interview during the seventh week of the 8-week summer program. The evaluation research strategy approximated a randomized groups post-test only design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Subjects

Project Youth group. Participants who had requested Project Youth as their SYEP placement were excluded from the outcome study, because self-selection factors might have made this group different from other SYEP enrollees. Consequently, five participants in the process study were omitted from the outcome study. Of the 27 participants remaining, 24 were women and 3 were men. The mean age of the group was 16.4 years (SD = 1.5 years). For additional characteristics of this group, see the description of the sample in the section on the process study.

Comparison group. The comparison group members were selected from work sites in the same localities as the Project Youth program sites. Comparison group members were also selected to be of approximately the same age as participants in Project Youth. A stratified random sampling procedure was used to select the members of the comparison group. Comparison group members were randomly selected from all SYEP enrollees of a particular age and sex in a particular locality to match the proportion of Project Youth enrollees with that set of characteristics. Since

it was expected that not all enrollees would be present on the day that the "job interviewer" arrived at the work site, more comparison group members were selected than were actually "interviewed". The groups, though, were similar in demographic characteristics. There were 28 enrollees selected to be in the comparison group who were available for interviews. In the comparison group, 24 members were women and 4 members were men. The mean age in the comparison group was 16.9 years (SD = 1.7 years). These youths, like the participants in Project Youth, all were Black or from Hispanic backgrounds and came from families who had very low incomes.

Administration of the Simulated Job Interview

All people in the Project Youth group and the comparison group were notified by letter that they had been selected by the Office of Employment and Training to participate in a simulated job interview for the purpose of examining the effectiveness of the SYEP program. These letters accompanied payroll cheques which were disbursed from a central location by SYEP; in other words, participants in the Project Youth group and participants in the comparison group received information about the simulated interview from the same source, the umbrella agency which administered all programs. Enrollees at work sites and enrollees in Project Youth received identical information; no mention was made that this interview would contribute to the evaluation of Project Youth. Approximately a week after the letters were distributed, a Caucasian male interviewer arrived at the program site or work site, requested the enrollee's cooperation, and interviewed the enrollee. The questions in the role play interview were standardized and followed the format of actual job interviews. First, the interviewer described the job opening. The position was for an entry level clerk in a large

company which had a policy of promoting people from entry level positions to higher positions. Then the interviewer asked a series of questions about high school courses and activities, interests outside of school, work experiences, working style, future goals, and perceptions of personal strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the interview, the interviewer discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the youth's performance and answered any questions. After the youth left, the interviewer completed a form which assessed the participant's performance.

Assessment of Performance

Performance in the interview was evaluated by the interviewer who rated the interviewee on several characteristics. Two global characteristics, interpersonal skills and level of motivation, were evaluated. These two characteristics consistently have been found to influence hiring decisions (Ulrich & Trumbo, 1963). More specific aspects of their performance were also appraised; both verbal and nonverbal components of the interviewee's performance were examined in this more fine-grained analysis. The specific characteristics evaluated were: clarity of speech, pertinence and comprehensiveness of responses to questions, eye contact, tone of voice, and posture. Both the global and the specific characteristics were assessed using a 6-point rating scale. The interviewer also indicated whether he would be willing to hire the interviewee; this was a dichotomous decision.

To examine interrater agreement, a second person was present as an observer for approximately one fifth of the interviews. There was substantial agreement between the interviewer and the observer; there was complete agreement on the decision of whether or not to hire.

Results

The Project Youth group and the comparison group were compared

by computing *t*-tests on the scores for each of the appraised characteristics. The groups were found to be significantly different on two of the seven characteristics. The Project Youth participants gave better answers to the interview questions; that is, the content of their responses was more pertinent and comprehensive. More specifically, the comparison group members were more likely to limit their answers to a few words and phrases whereas Project Youth participants were more expansive in their responses (t (53) = 2.07), $p < .05$; Project Youth: $M = 4.33$; $SD = .98$; comparison group $M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.01$). The Project Youth participants also were found to have significantly better interpersonal skills than the participants from the supported work placements. In other words, they were perceived as being more likely to work well with supervisors and co-workers (t (53) = 2.28, $p < .05$; Project Youth: $M = 4.03$, $SD = .53$; comparison group: $M = 3.58$, $SD = .56$).

A decision favoring employment was made for half the Project Youth participants and one third of the comparison group. Thus, the proportion of favorable hiring decisions was in the predicted direction, although the difference between the groups was not found to be significant using a chi-square test.

Discussion

The workshop directors observed several changes in the participants during the program. Weekly assessments of the participants' performance indicated steady improvement in initiative, ability to apply learning, and the use of constructive evaluation with respect to both self and others. The comparison of problem areas at the beginning and end of the program suggested that the participants' decisiveness and work habits

had also improved. Improvement in the ability to make decisions was a particularly significant change from the perspective of the workshop directors since they had indicated that decisiveness was a major problem for many of the participants at the beginning of the program.

The comparison of Project Youth participants with youth who had been working at jobs supported by the Summer Youth Employment Program indicated that the Project Youth group had better interpersonal skills than the other group. Level of interpersonal skills is an important component of favorable hiring decisions. Improvement in interpersonal skills also is likely to permit people to perform better on jobs that require working with others. Thus, the difference between the groups on interpersonal skills may not only have an impact on Project Youth participants' ability to obtain jobs but also on their ability to retain positions. Of the more specific characteristics, the Project Youth participants were better than the comparison group members on one verbal skill, the ability to give pertinent and comprehensive answers to questions. This finding indicated an improvement in participants' ability to express themselves.

Given the differences between the two groups at the end of the summer program, it is appropriate to examine specific aspects of the Project Youth workshops that may have contributed to these differences. The two most frequently used activities, verbal improvisation and scene work, both involved practice in expressing oneself verbally. It may have been the participants' active participation in creating dramatic scenes and rehearsing scenes that permitted them to produce better answers and to behave more appropriately in a novel setting.

The most rigorous test of the outcome of an intervention program for youths at high risk for unemployment is a determination of how successful these youths are at finding employment and remaining employed. Since most of the participants in this program were returning to school in the semester following the summer program, an outcome study on unemployment rates would have required following the participants' activities for several years and consequently was not feasible. The current study represented an attempt to examine intermediary variables that would affect rates of unemployment. The examination of intermediate variables had the potential to indicate not only whether the program was successful but also the specific strengths and weaknesses of the intervention program.

As stated previously, the results were supportive of the positive effects of this program relative to pure work experiences. The Project Youth participants were found to provide better answers to the interview questions and to appear more likely to be able to work well with others. A weakness of the program as reflected in the simulated interview was that the program participants were not different from the youths working in supported jobs in their motivation to work. It is possible that the participants' motivation appeared low, because the position presented in the interview was simulated and would not truly lead to a job. It is also possible that motivation only appeared not to have increased because the motivational level of the comparison group had increased a similar amount through participation in the subsidized work experience. If the latter possibility were supported by additional research, then one could conclude that teaching theater skills to youths is an effective

strategy for increasing their employment opportunities.

Given the lack of studies specifically examining the issue of motivation to work with respect to supported work programs, it is also possible that neither program sufficiently increased participants' motivation such that the probability increased that participants would be hired in the future. This possibility was supported by the low rate of positive hiring decisions made in the simulated interview. The interview had a positive outcome for only a third of the Project Youth participants and a quarter of the comparison group participants.

One clue to the low level of motivation perceived in the simulated interview may be the workshop directors' perceptions at the beginning of the program that the youths had unrealistically high expectations about future employment. The workshop directors did not perceive change in this area. The participants may not have been motivated to try hard to obtain a clerical job in the simulated interview, because they expected that the future held better opportunities for them. Participation in Project Youth might lead to a more favorable rate of hiring decisions if this program were combined with an additional intervention that improved motivation. This intervention might be directed at helping youths to understand the concept of career development, or in other words, to understand that major opportunities can come from performing well in small opportunities.

In summary, the use of theater and drama exercises was found to increase the verbal expressiveness and interpersonal skills of Black and Hispanic youths from low income backgrounds. This study, though, also indicated that one important component of positive hiring decisions,

their motivation to work, was not different from youths from similar backgrounds who had participated in subsidized work programs. If the typical subsidized job improves a minority group youth's chances for future employment, then the results of this study were quite supportive of teaching theater skills to this target group to increase their employment prospects. If one believes that subsidized work programs have limited effectiveness, then the approach represented in the current study must be combined with additional novel procedures focused on increasing motivation to enhance the opportunities of minority group youths from low income backgrounds to obtain employment.

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Table 1

Analyses of Weekly Change in Workshop Skills

Workshop Skill	F-tests for Main Effects for Weeks [a]	F-tests for Linear Trend [b]
Initiation		
Frequency	9.0	37.3
Quality	5.1	33.5
Evaluation of Self		
Frequency	17.0	116.1
Quality	8.3	56.1
Evaluation of Others		
Frequency	15.5	55.9
Quality	14.6	5.2
Adaptation of Skills		
Frequency	18.4	34.0
Quality	28.2	13.4

Note: For all of the above F-tests, $p < .001$.

[a] $df = 6,42$

[b] $df = 1,7$

Table 2

Frequency Each Week of Use of Workshop Skills

Workshop Skill	Week													
	2		3		4		5		6		7		8	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Initiation	.23	.10	.23	.07	.25	.09	.25	.09	.31	.06	.33	.04	.34	.07
Evaluation of self	.14	.07	.14	.05	.21	.08	.18	.09	.25	.05	.29	.06	.31	.06
Evaluation of others	.16	.07	.16	.05	.20	.05	.18	.09	.25	.05	.29	.06	.30	.05
Adaptation of skills	.20	.09	.20	.09	.21	.08	.24	.09	.30	.05	.34	.05	.35	.05